

# **PRACTICAL MATERIALS FOR THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY**

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## **Plan for our presentation:**

**1. Why the study of language acquisition is crucial for work on language revitalization**

**short break**

**2. How simple materials can be used to assess language development and language deficits**

# **1. Introduction—Some basics of language acquisition and loss**

## **What is a heritage language?**

A heritage language is learned naturalistically at home in the pre-school years, but is seldom or never used outside the home .

The home languages of immigrant children in America are classic examples of heritage languages.

But in many cultures, indigenous languages have become heritage languages too.

In the absence of an opportunity to use them at school or in the workplace, they are employed only at home (at best).

## **Why are heritage languages so often endangered?**

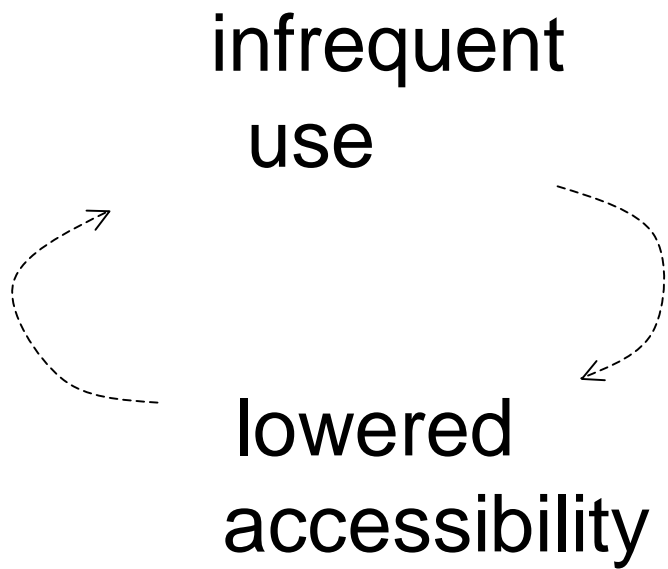
Because they are not used and heard often enough in a sufficiently wide variety of situations to support full acquisition and maintenance.

A basic fact about the relationship between language proficiency and language use:

... all languages need maintenance and advanced use ...  
Learning another language does not remove an older language from memory, but does push it more to the background and makes it more difficult to access...  
(De Bot 2004)



# The slippery slope of language decline:



## **What happens to heritage languages before they disappear entirely?**

Because they are partially acquired and under-maintained, the 'hard things' are lost.

- the typologically unusual phonological contrasts
- the intricate patterns of case marking, agreement and other types of inflection
- fine vocabulary distinctions in particular areas of life and culture
- the ability to produce structurally complex sentences

Sadly, the things that made the language different, special, and even unique are lost first, because they are the things that require the most experience to acquire and to maintain.

## **2. Is there a way back?**

**The only genuine way is to create the conditions in which the language is transmitted naturalistically from each generation to the next.**

## **Children are very good language learners.**

They learn the basics of a language quite quickly—flawless pronunciation, several thousand vocabulary items, and a good mastery of basic syntactic patterns in just a few years.

**But there are two major myths about children's acquisition of language that can create a false sense of optimism about the prospects for an endangered language.**

**Myth 1: Children learn language ‘on their own’, with minimal exposure to parental speech.**



**IN FACT, children need a massive amount of exposure to language, and any shortfalls are reflected in their developmental trajectory.**

*Children whose parents talk to them a lot hear as many as 2.5 million utterances/year.*

average vocabulary at 30 mos:  
**766 words**

*Children whose parents talk less to them may hear as few as 800,000 utterances/year.*

average vocabulary at 30 mos:

**357 words**

**Myth 2: Once a child learns a language, it's safe for that generation.**

**IN FACT, children quickly lose the ability to speak and understand a language.**

Sobering data from a study of more than 800 children adopted from the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union between 1992 and 2004.

Age of adoption: 3.5 - 4 years

Production lost in 7-12 wks.

Comprehension lost in 11-15 wks.

Age of adoption: 4 - 6 years

Production lost in 2 - 3 mos.

Comprehension lost in 3 – 5 mos.

Age of adoption: 6 - 7 years

Production lost in 2 - 3 mos.

Comprehension lost in 6 mos.



Age of adoption: 7 - 9 years

Production lost in 3 - 6 mos.

Comprehension lost in 9 - 12 mos.

The good guardians of a language are not children.

They are adults who learn the language as children and use it continuously throughout their lives.

## **A major challenge for language revitalization programs**

Most revitalization programs do not include a rigorous attempt to assess deficits or progress.

Peter, Edds & Anderson's (2008) study of the acquisition of verb inflection by Cherokee children who had been in an immersion program for two or three years.

## Cherokee agreement

**ga-** tliha

3A.Sg-sleep

‘S/he is sleeping.’

**ani-aditasga**

**3A.PI-drink**

**‘They are drinking.’**

On an elicited production task in which children described pictures, they produced

the right singular form: < 20%

the right plural form: < 10%

Why?

- Children's opportunities for speech production were limited.
- The teachers tended to use verb forms involving commands



- That's not an argument against NS teachers.
- It's an argument in favor of giving them proper training.
- It's an argument in favor of understanding how language acquisition works.
- And it's an argument in favor of doing proper assessment of progress.

**Language revitalization has to be  
MONITORED.**

There is a need for materials that can be used by teachers, field workers, and others who have a stake in assessing language development.

Our objective today:  
Demonstrate some simple materials to  
test oral proficiency.

# **Two types of grammatical phenomena:**

## **First-tier**

**The coding strategies that are reflected in the language's most basic intransitive and transitive sentences.**

## **Second tier**

- **Ways of questioning**
- **Alternative voices (e.g., passives)**
- **Sentence with clausal embedding**
- **And many more**

## **The classic first-tier phenomenon— the use of coding strategies**

- Word order: Does the subject come before or after the direct object?



- Agreement: Does the verb carry a marker that matches a feature of the subject or direct object (like singular or plural)?

- Case: Are the subject and direct objects accompanied by an identifying marker?

## **Mastery of coding strategies should be measured from the point of view of production**

Production tasks provide a gold standard for the assessment of linguistic proficiency since the results bear on the type of skill needed for the language to be transmitted inter-generationally.

It's true that comprehension is  
(generally) in advance of production...

And being able to understand a  
language is a good thing ...

But that doesn't help anyone else.

A common and low-tech production protocol:

Requests for descriptions of pictures.

(Can be used with adults or children.)

*What's happening here?*



'oku lele [ 'a e tamasi'i].

PRS run **CASE** boy

'A boy is running.'

*What's happening here?*



'oku ta: [ 'e he tamasi'i] [ 'a e 'akau]

PRS fell **CASE** boy **CASE** tree

'A boy is cutting down a tree.'

Case marker for subject  
of transitive verb: 'e

Case marker for subject  
of intransitive verb: 'a

Case marker for dir. obj.: 'a



## Three points in conclusion

1. There can be no language revitalization without language acquisition.

2. Language acquisition and language maintenance are more fragile than is generally believed by parents and educators.

3. Revitalization programs must be accompanied by rigorous assessment protocols to gauge both developmental deficits and developmental progress.

Within the next several months, we hope to make available our full archive of materials.

Another very important coding strategy involves agreement.

In the Micronesian language,  
Mortlockese, a third person singular  
subject is marked by the morpheme *e*.

<i>Ewe</i>	<i>nengin</i>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;">e</div>	<i>mour.</i> (Mortlockese)
one	girl	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;">3S.AGRS</div>	sleep

±A girl is sleeping.q

And a third person plural subject is marked by the morpheme *re*.

*Ekewe nengin re mour.* (Mortlockese)

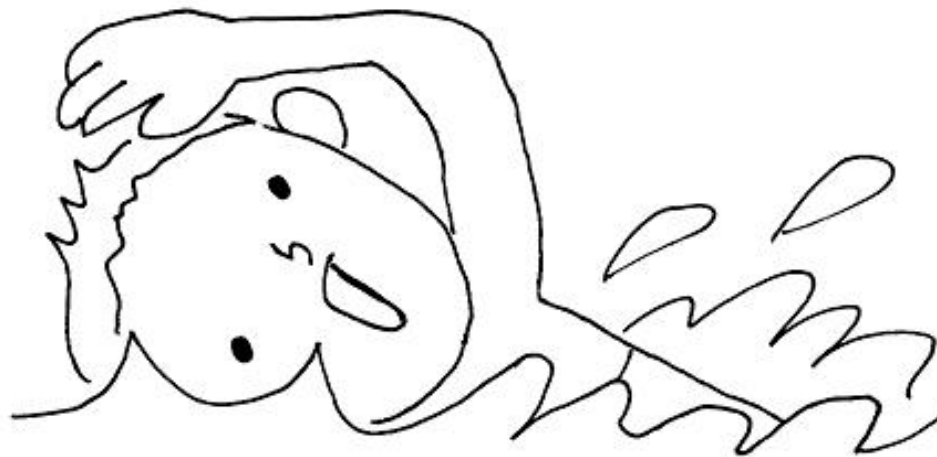
some girl 3P.AGRS sleep

Some girls are sleeping.



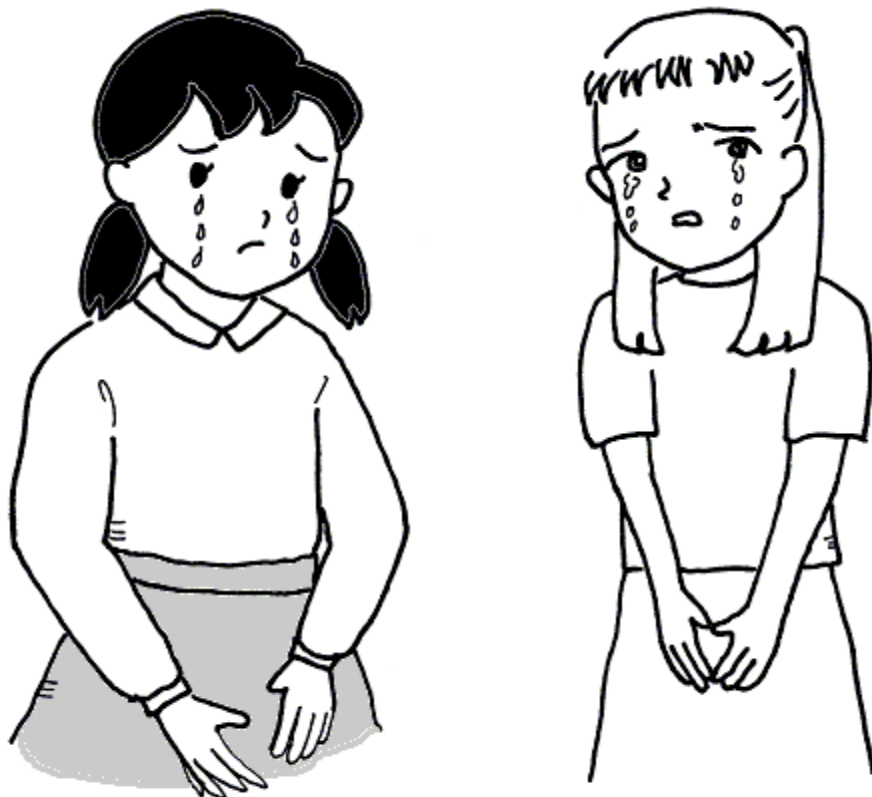
It's relatively easy to elicit subject agreement. Let's start with intransitive verbs.

*What's happening here?*



Boy<sub>Sing</sub> swim<sub>Sing</sub>

*What's happening here?*



Girls<sub>Plural</sub> cry<sub>Plural</sub>

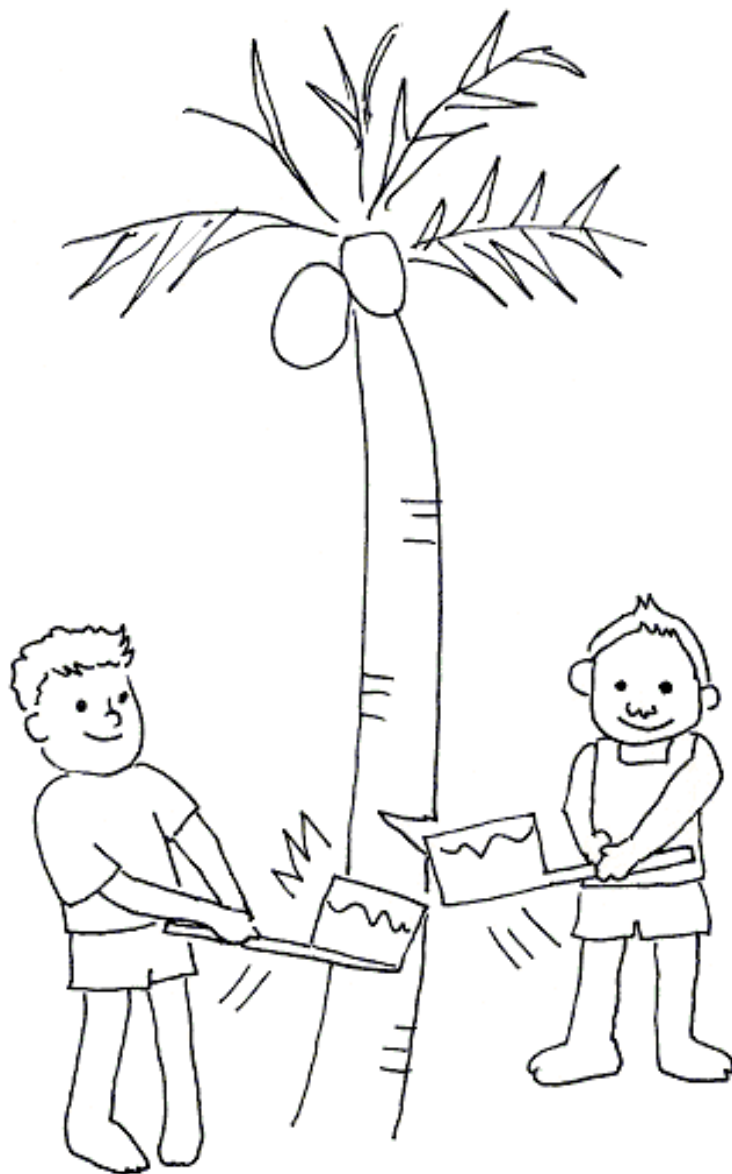
Then the same thing can be done for transitive verbs.

*What's happening here?*



Boy<sub>Sing</sub> cut<sub>Sing</sub> tree

*What's happening here?*

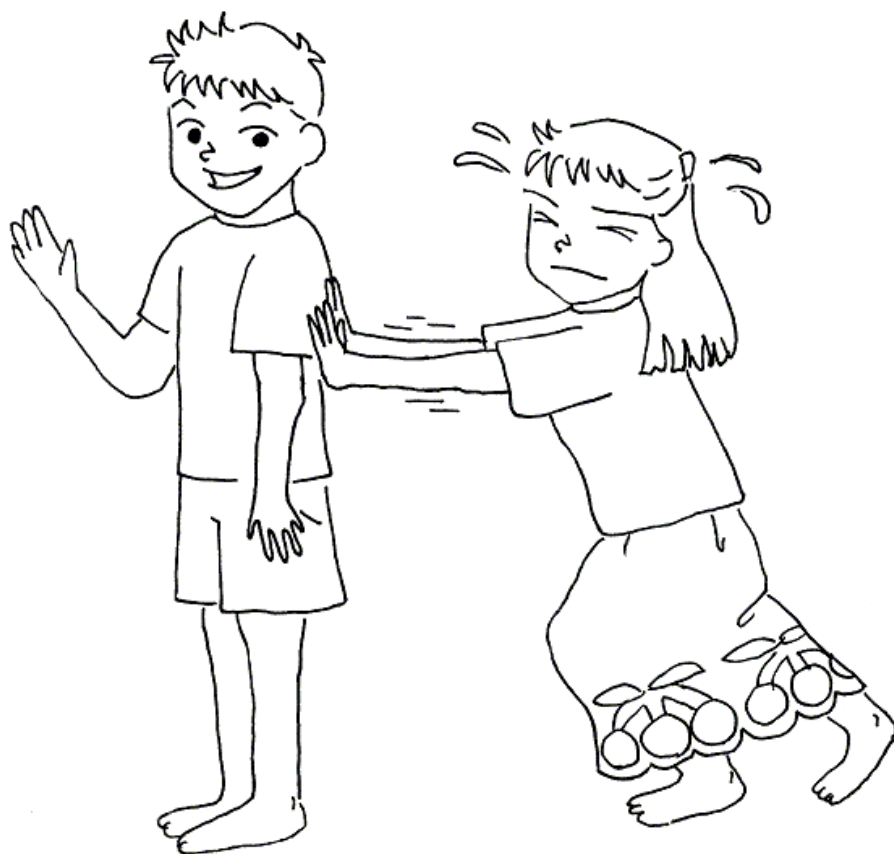


Boys<sub>Plural</sub> cut<sub>Plural</sub> tree

Some languages also have agreement with the direct object.

To test for a singular-plural contrast, we can use pictures like the following.

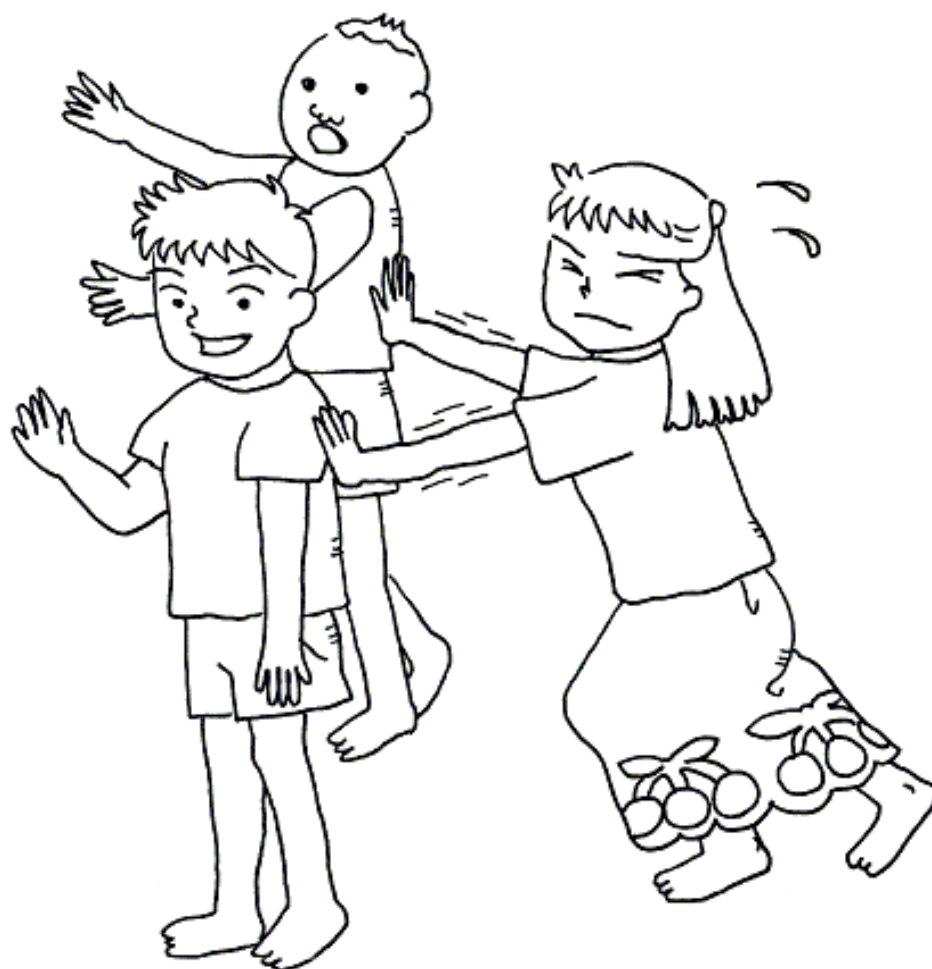
*What's happening here?*



Girl push<sub>Sing</sub> boy<sub>Sing</sub>



*What's happening here?*



Girl push<sub>Plural</sub> boys<sub>Plural</sub>

But this may not be enough. In some languages, agreement is sensitive to whether the direct object is animate or inanimate.

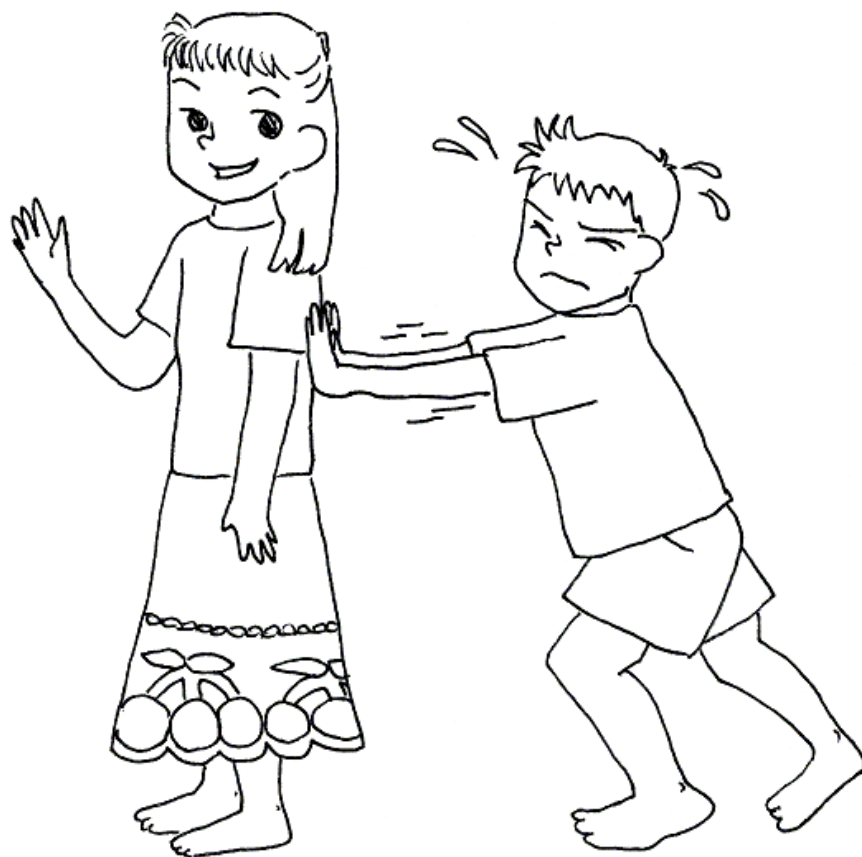
Testing this calls for pictures like the following.

*What's happening here?*



Boy cut<sub>Inanim.</sub> tree<sub>Inanim.</sub>

*What's happening here?*

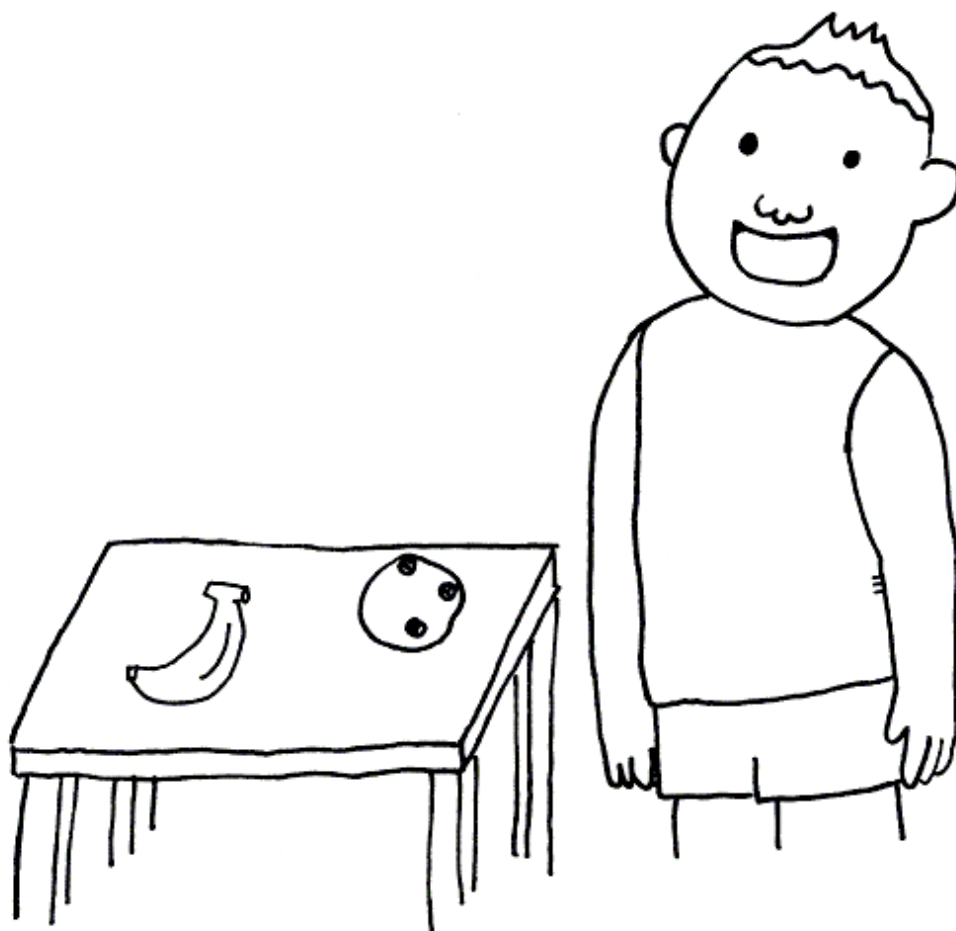


Boy push<sub>Anim.</sub> girl<sub>Anim.</sub>

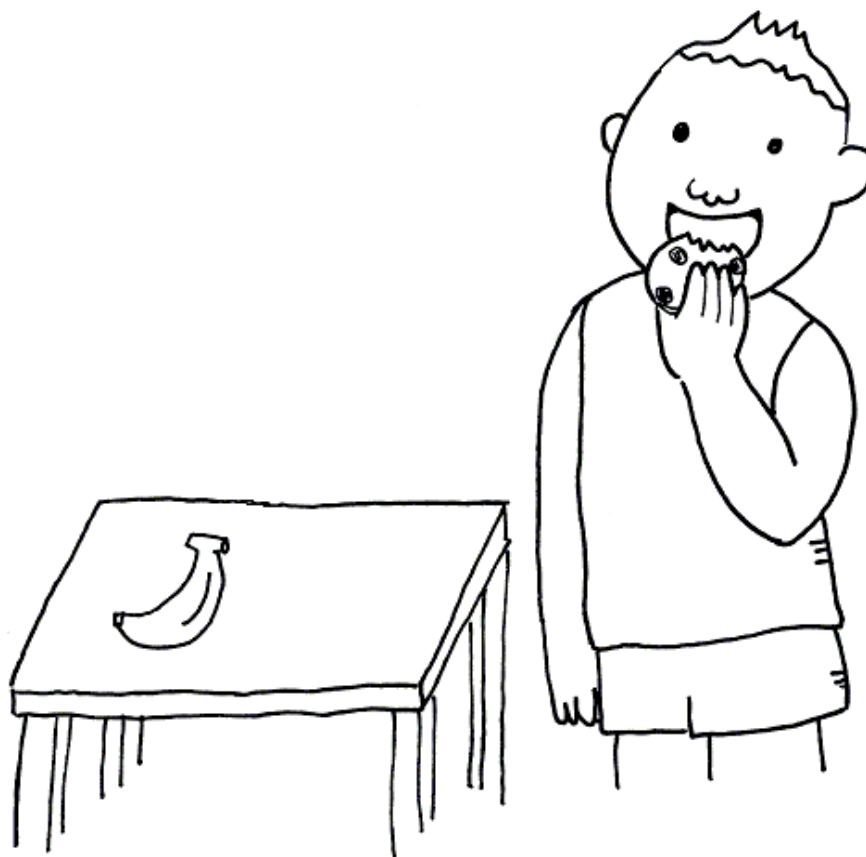
But this may not be enough either. In some languages, verbal inflection is sensitive to whether the direct object has a specific referent.

To elicit a direct object with a specific referent, we show a series of two pictures.

*What do you see on the table?*



*What's happening now?*



Boy eat<sub>Sing</sub> (the) cookie<sub>Sing</sub>



In order to elicit a direct object with a non-specific referent, we show a single picture.

*What's happening here?*



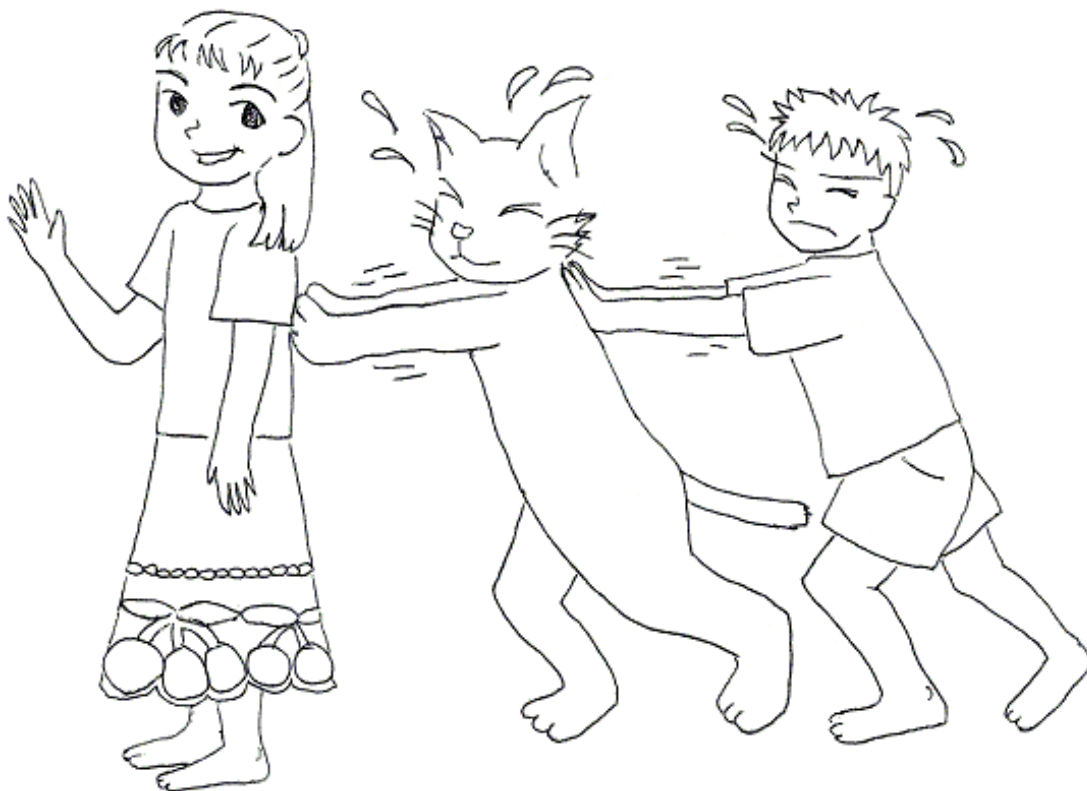
Girl pick (a) flower

It's important to elicit more than just statements! We need to know whether the speakers of a language can use other basic sentence types too, including questions.

Let's consider how to test children's comprehension and production of *Wh*-questions. For the comprehension test, we use a picture like this.

**To test comprehension of a subject  
*wh* question:**

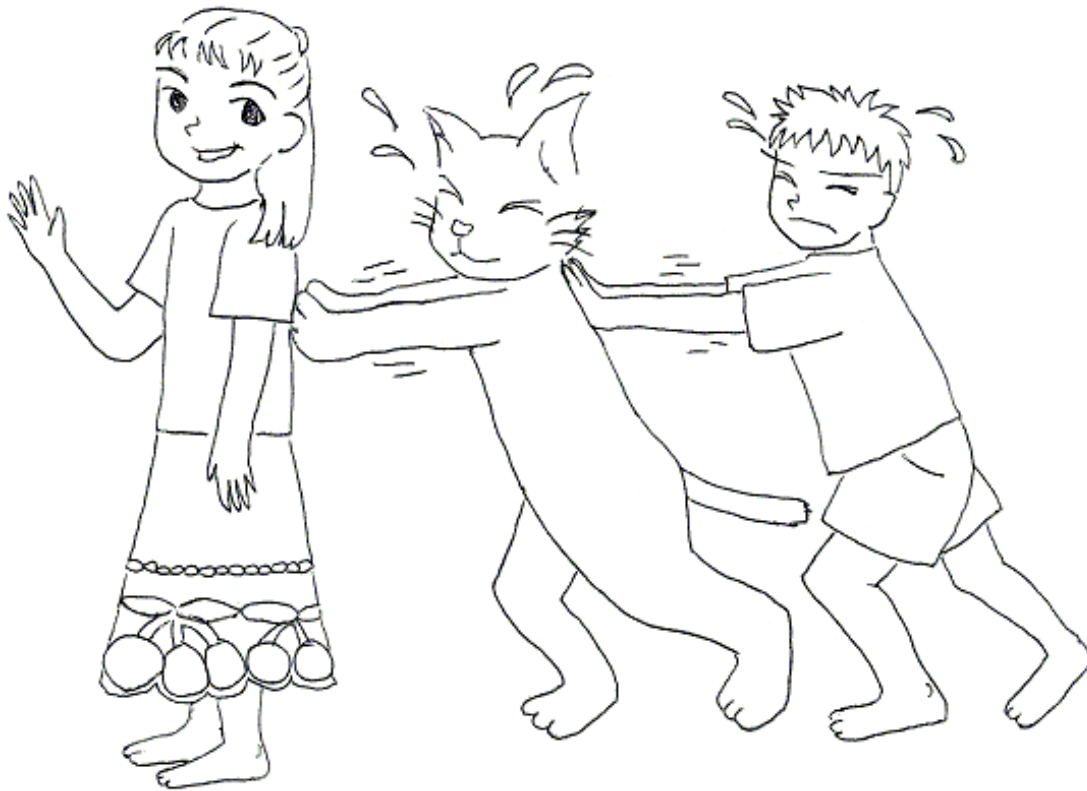
*Who is pushing the cat?*



(Right answer: ~~the~~ boy)

**The same type of picture can be used to test comprehension of a direct object *wh* question:**

*Who is the cat pushing?*

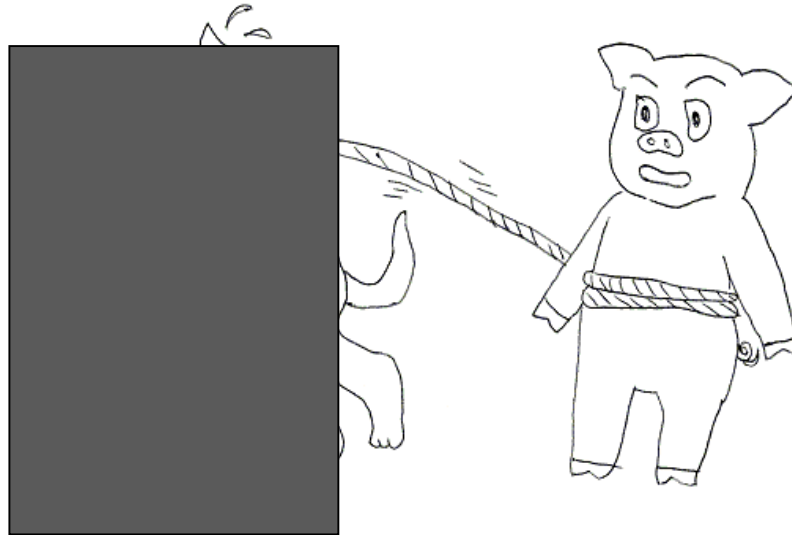


(Right answer: ~~the~~ the girl)

## How to elicit the production of *wh* questions.

*Someone is pulling the pig. Ernie knows who. Can you ask him?*

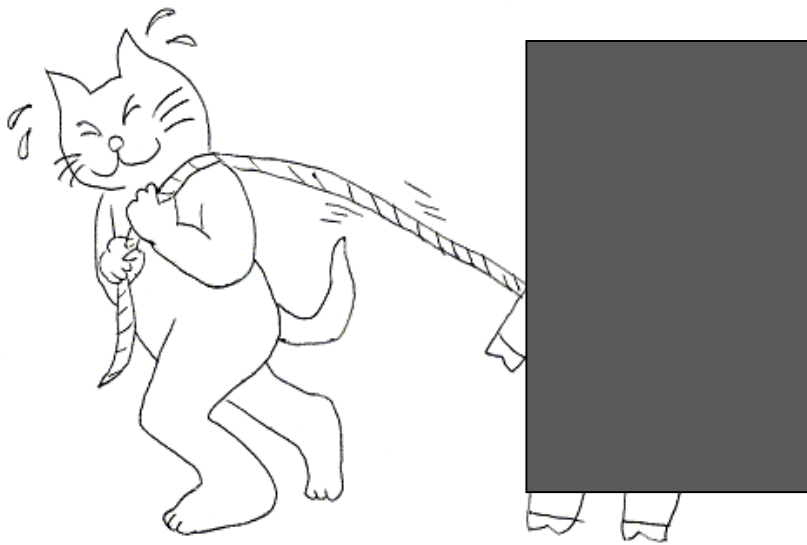
(For subject *Wh*-question)



(Right answer: ~~Who~~ Who is pulling the pig?)

*The cat is pulling someone. Ernie knows who. Can you ask him?*

(For object *Wh*-question)



(Right answer: ~~Who~~ Who is the cat pulling?)



It's also important to test children on complex sentence types, as the loss of the ability to produce these patterns is a sign of language attrition.

Relative clauses are a common component of complex sentences, and there's a relatively simple way to elicit them.

## Subject relative clauses (production test)

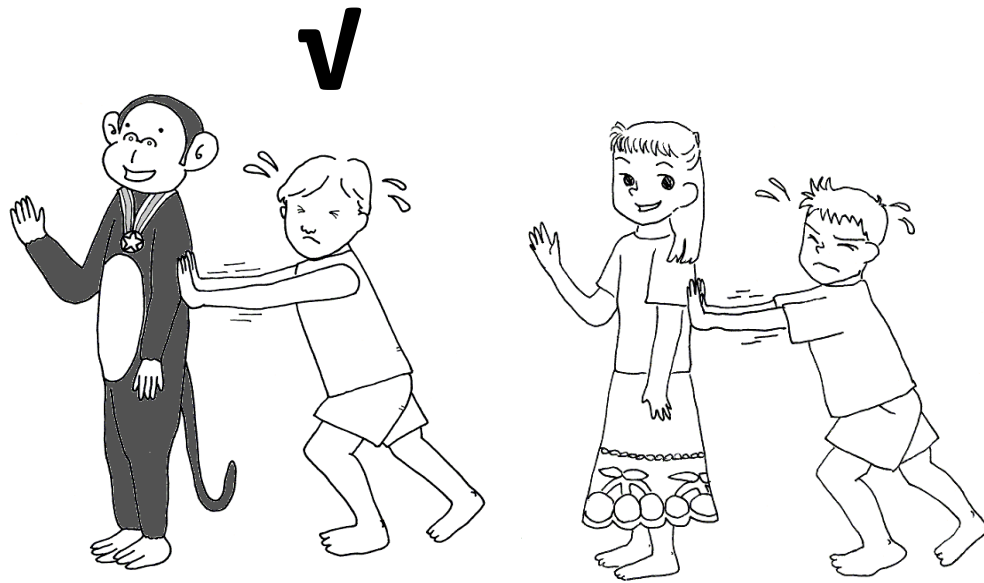
*This boy is pushing a monkey.*



*And this boy is pushing a girl.*



*Can you tell me which boy has the check mark?*

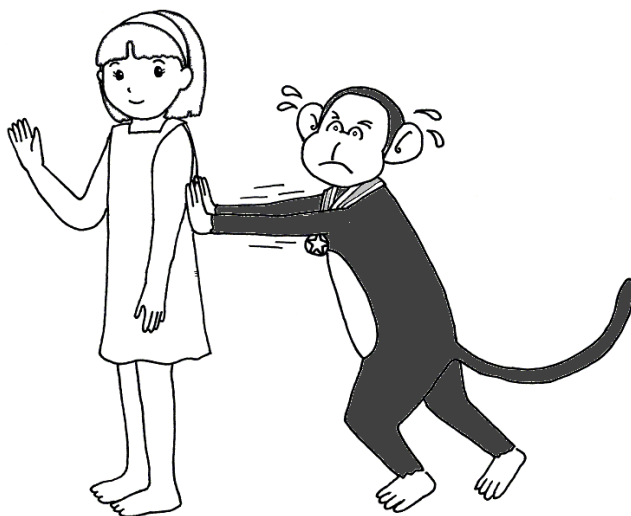


(Right answer: ~~the~~ the boy who is pushing the monkey)

The preceding example elicited a subject relative clause. It's also possible to elicit a direct object relative clause in the same way.

## Object relative clauses (production test)

*This monkey is pushing a girl.*

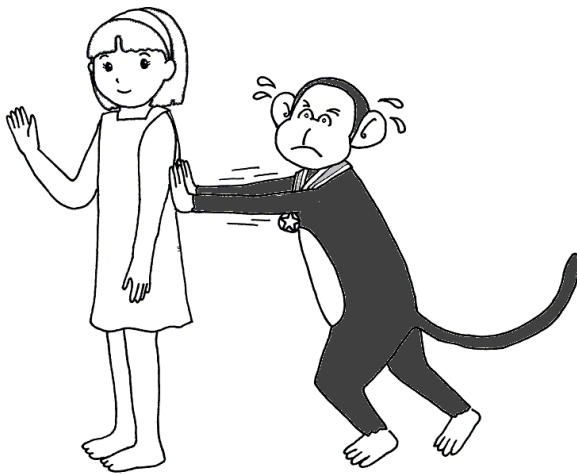


*And this boy is pushing a girl.*



*Can you tell me which girl has the check mark?*

✓



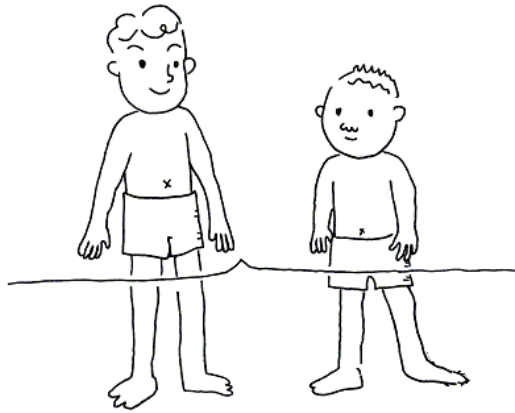
(Right answer: ~~the~~ the girl who the boy is pushing)

It's also important to assess the ability to describe events in more than one way, depending on which participant is taken to be more prominent or topical.

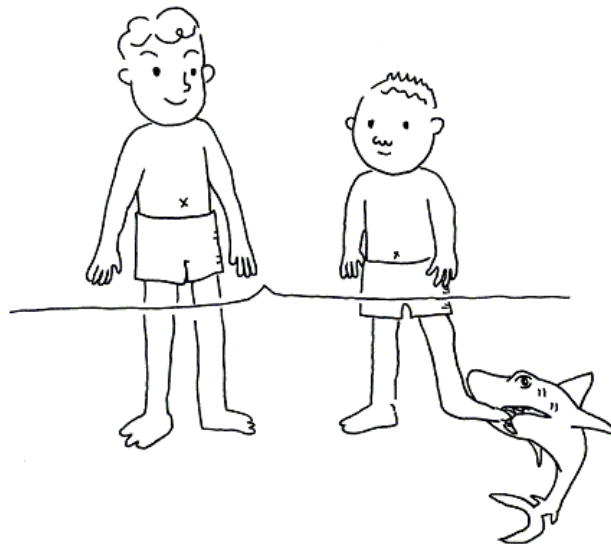


Here's a way to encourage children to produce a passive, if they know how.

*A tall boy and short boy are standing in the sea.*



*What happened to the short boy?*



(Right answer: The short boy was bitten by the shark.)